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JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

Towards an integrated library network of the United Nations system

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to submit to the General Assembly the comments of the Administrative Committee on Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Towards an integrated library network of the United Nations system" (A/47/669).

* A/48/50.

ANNEX

Comments of the Administrative Committee on Coordination

I. GENERAL

1. The Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) shares the desire expressed in the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Towards an integrated library network of the United Nations system" (A/47/699) for improving communication between the libraries of the United Nations system and for making the exchange of information more efficient. It also endorses the goal of developing a cost-effective integrated mechanism to increase interaction and cooperation among United Nations libraries for the benefit of the community of users of United Nations information and finds the guidelines for further modernization of libraries helpful in achieving that goal. ACC is pleased to note that many organizations have already established their own internal integrated library networks.

2. ACC notes with satisfaction the emphasis on the strengthening of the coordination effort between libraries of the United Nations system and the practical steps that have already been taken in the framework of the Technical Panel on Interlibrary Cooperation, Standards and Management of the Advisory Committee for the Coordination of Information Systems (ACCIS), including the efforts to extend the scope of cooperative activities beyond those of headquarters libraries to include regional and field information units.

3. The report provides valuable information on facilities and activities of libraries of the United Nations system. However, the libraries profiled are not necessarily fully representative of the wide range of libraries and information providers within the system, a fact that may have been overlooked, since the Inspector's recommendations appear to be intended for the whole spectrum of United Nations libraries. For example, an important omission was the absence of observations on the libraries of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), and those of regional commissions.

4. The members of ACC have different views with regard to the proposal to create an integrated system-wide United Nations library network. Some of them fully support that objective, emphasizing the importance of the joint use of available and emerging technologies, including their timely and coordinated application. Others indicate that their limited resources preclude any serious consideration of participation in such projects at the present juncture; however, they intend to monitor its progress closely and to participate when financial resources become available.

5. Other organizations caution against aiming at one large information network as a panacea for increasing interlibrary cooperation and access to information and have doubts about its feasibility. They consider the assessment made in the report that objective conditions could be rapidly created to establish a system-wide network as too general and liable to different interpretations. The advocated system-wide network may be feasible with regard only to major publications and documents of the United Nations system, although even in that

case the problem of indexing incompatibility could arise. However, the specialized agencies produce many other types of documents: field project papers, field technical documents, technical meeting papers, and so on, which are of interest to specialized communities and could not be effectively incorporated into a common database or properly managed in a system-wide network.

6. It was also felt that because the mission, clientele, standards, practices and the level of implemented technology vary greatly among the libraries of the United Nations system, the single integrated electronic information system envisioned in the report is neither desirable nor achievable in a cost-effective manner. The establishment of any electronic networks should be based on specific needs to share data and should reflect carefully thought out criteria for inclusion of data and access. While many of these specialized information focuses do exist within the United Nations, there are no strong reasons to believe that the creation of one all-encompassing United Nations information network is more effective than pursuing existing and feasible avenues of interlibrary cooperation and data sharing such as searching other organizations' databases via telecommunication links like INTERNET, or sharing bibliographic records for organizational publications in a standard format.

II. SPECIFIC COMMENTS

7. With regard to databases, the report does not appear to recognize fully the situation in some agencies where bibliographic databases are not necessarily managed by the libraries. It also concentrates mostly on the various aspects of the libraries' own collections and publications, whereas the interaction with member States, through the efforts made by some agencies to develop international databases to which member States contribute and act as partners, does not receive full coverage.

8. It would have been desirable to see in the report more critical assessments of the reasons for selection and efficiency of the information systems and software already in use throughout the United Nations system. Some of the organizations have always attempted to promote and use the systems and software developed by system agencies because of their availability relatively free of commercial constraints and their relevance to cooperation and joint ventures within the United Nations system. It would be useful to know why some of the software, for example the mainframe and Mini-Micro CDS/ISIS of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), specifically developed for library and documentation applications, were rejected by some organizations in favour of commercial software.

9. Regarding the adoption of international standards and common formats, the report should have devoted more attention to the work done during the two last decades by UNESCO in developing and promoting common formats and standard data-handling procedures and to the assessment of how UNESCO's recommendations were implemented within the United Nations system.

10. Concerning the harmonization of acquisition policy, the limitations have to be recognized, as each organization and agency has its specific acquisition policy, which may not have elements in common with the other specialized

libraries. In relation to non-core material, it is probably more useful to coordinate acquisition policies with local libraries in order to ensure rapid access to publications.

11. As specialized agencies in a very technical field, some members of ACC consider external (non-United Nations) sources of information to be of vital interest and devote particular attention to the use of external telecommunication networks and information suppliers. In that connection, only a well-coordinated approach can ensure that United Nations libraries will not end up buying one another's products and services through some commercially available system or network.

12. Since the report was finalized, there have been two developments that are relevant to its conclusions. The first is that an ACCIS working group chaired by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has received approval for the production of a compact disc read only memory (CD-ROM) containing references to documents and publications produced by the different agencies within the system. The target production date is autumn of 1993. For the first time, it will be possible to identify the output of the system as a whole on a given subject. The second development, which pertains to report recommendations, is that ACCIS has established a Technical Panel on Interlibrary Cooperation, Standards and Management (TP/LIB), which has already taken some practical steps within its terms of reference.

13. ACC wishes to stress that, in considering the recommendations of the report, one needs to keep sight of the unique and diversified characters of the libraries of the individual specialized agencies; those libraries have been established and developed to meet the unique requirements and demands of the member States and the public in the specialized, highly technical fields for which the respective specialized agencies are responsible.

Recommendation 1

14. This recommendation is supported. Effective policies, standards and leadership are essential both for creating effective library and information networks within United Nations organizations and laying the groundwork for networking across organizations.

Recommendation 2

15. This recommendation is supported. ACC agrees that information services within each organization should be viewed as a whole. Management should build an organizational structure that would be most conducive to synergy among the information functions.

Recommendation 3

16. ACC supports the call for the sharing of experience in the production and administration of databases within organizations. Not only libraries should be included in that exchange but also other information units within many United Nations organizations that also have considerable expertise in database management.

Recommendation 4

17. With regard to the issues cited in paragraph 153 as being of system-wide concern, some organizations commented as follows:

(a) Indexing and bibliographic control: the specialized agencies have indexing requirements for their technical literature that differ from those of the general and politically oriented UNBIS database. These are met by such thesauruses as AGROVOC, INIS, LABORDOC and MESH, which are incompatible with the UNBIS thesaurus and with each other. The difference in indexing and in formats does not allow for stripping inputs into specialized thesauruses from another agency's databases. A common United Nations thesaurus is therefore not feasible;

(b) Application of international standards: it was agreed that international standards should be mandatory where feasible;

(c) and (m) CD-ROM production and dissemination: joint production and dissemination of CD-ROMs is an issue that depends not only on internal United Nations system considerations but also on external factors that are not necessarily common to the system. CD-ROMs should be used to disseminate the information widely, particularly outside the United Nations system. Here the requirements of subject-user communities, which should be taken into account, may not be compatible with the requirements of the common United Nations CD-ROM;

(d) Utilization of commercial and non-commercial hosts: each agency and organization needs to use the hosts that provide the data it needs most effectively and economically. It is not clear at the present juncture what could be done on a global level for facilitating that decision;

(f) and (g) Acquisitions catalogue and policy: since acquisitions are based on agency needs, it seems to be more appropriate to harmonize them with relevant local libraries, where sharing of collections can be mutually beneficial and practical, rather than to try to harmonize collections with other agencies having different subject interest. Even where United Nations entities have some common interest, their locations may not allow them, in terms of time and cost, to establish and maintain an efficient exchange of publications from their holdings;

(h) International database server: careful considerations should be given to the technical, financial and administrative requirements of such a server. The experience of some agencies shows that it is often more economical and effective to use external commercial hosts that have the critical size to be cost-effective.

Recommendation 5

18. Some members of ACC find that the formation of an interlibrary panel as recommended by the Joint Inspection Unit would be a useful channel for establishing a common United Nations policy in that area, as well as for determining the technical and methodological requirements for an integrated library network. Such a permanent panel should consist of representatives of

the main organizations and agencies. It should not have a centralized secretariat, but rely on a lead agency on a rotating basis.

19. Others are not convinced of the validity of this recommendation. Although they share the view that there is a need for a continuing mechanism to promote library cooperation and networking, they believe that that need can best be served by establishing the recently created ACCIS TP/LIB on a more permanent basis. Directors of a spectrum of United Nations libraries are in the best position to set and implement library networking arrangements. Relying on the existing ACCIS mechanism, primarily on TP/LIB, as well as on well-established professional working contacts, which are frequent and have proved to be effective and practical, would be adequate to meet the need for the promotion and improvement of inter-agency cooperation. Such an approach would be in line with the recommendation in the report to take advantage of existing mechanisms for interlibrary cooperation in order to avoid duplication and the misuse of financial and human resources.

20. In some organizations and specialized agencies, information systems and database management go beyond the library functions and cover international cooperative information systems with the active participation of member States. There are therefore specific requirements for those databases, which do not necessarily involve the managers of the libraries not concerned with the systems. Since the issues to be handled by the proposed interlibrary mechanism are of a complex nature, there is a need for different specialists to be involved.

Recommendation 6

21. Members of ACC are in agreement with this recommendation. They emphasize that the establishment of continuing education and professional development programmes would be most beneficial. It is suggested that a common curriculum base be developed, which could be used for continuous training of United Nations librarians. Such a base could rely on a set of training manuals that could be either locally used or presented through appropriate seminars or workshops. With regard to the temporary assignment of United Nations librarians to national libraries, some agencies did not find it either feasible or practical.